Avalon Presbyterian Home
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John Buchanan

I am delighted to be here to help celebrate the 45th anniversary of the founding of this wonderful organization and enterprise, The Avalon Presbyterian Homes, and the 10th anniversary of your newest building, and I am honored to be invited to help launch the new Avalon Chapel Speaker Series.

I am particularly delighted to be here with your chaplain, Linda Loving. Sue and I jump at every chance to spend time with Linda, one of our very dearest friends. In fact "friend" doesn't do justice to it. She is truly part of our family: each of our five children and their spouses and their children, our grandchildren, (13 , by the way. I can't resist that, by the way, and it occurred to me that you, particularly will understand and

forgive me for using every opportunity to talk about them. I also have pictures.) All of us love Linda.

I met Linda shortly after we moved to Chicago in 1985, when I was called to be the pastor of The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. She was serving at a suburban church at the time. A mutual friend suggested that I ought to get to know her.. So we met, had lunch and before we got to desert, I knew that I wanted to work and serve with her. Besides, the lunch was great fun. We talked and laughed a lot. In fact, we've been talking and laughing ever since. Now, I don't make important decisions without consulting my partner and most astute advisor. Well, it took Sue about a minute to decide that we would be very fortunate and blessed if we could convince Linda to move back downtown and to join us in ministry. So

she came and literally changed the way FourthChurch saw itself and understood its mission and ministry in that unique environment , sitting, as it does, on one of the busiest urban intersections in the country. Fourth Church had not grown for years. We asked Linda to lead us in Evangelism and outreach and new member recruitment. She recruited leaders, planned and organized a whole new approach, reached out to the many visitors who show up in the pews of Fourth Church on Sunday morning, taught the new member class and recruited lay people to help and before we knew it, two very important things began to happen. People began to enjoy being with her, began to enjoy being a church, and we began to receive 30 -35 - 40 new members every month, many of them young adult, single and maried, young families, the very people everyone was saying had given up

on the church, weren't the slightest bit interested in organized religion. Happily, the church experienced robust, steady growth the entire time Linda was with us. When she left to become Pastor and Head of Staff in Oakland, California, and he House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, she left behind a wonderful legacy,. a more energetic, outward looking, robust and growing congregation. People loved her, and still do.

We became dear friends . She was our Pastor when our family and Sue and I needed a pastor. Whenever we are in any kind of trouble, we want Linda.

Now, you didn't invite me here - and she certainly didn't - to say nice things about Linda, but I simply had to tell you how much I respect her as a colleague, how much Sue and I love

her, and how fortunate you are to have as part of this family.

I'm also glad to be here because I have a long history with Presbyterian Homes. When I was a child my arents were friends with Mrs. Hazard, who lived at The Presbyterian Home in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, and after church on Sunday we would drive to Hollidaysburg and they would visit. She was a very nice person - but I have to admit that I was bored, impatient and counted the minutes till we left for home and I could get on with the serious business of the Sunday Comic.

Later, I served on the Board of Trustees of Ohio Presbyterian Homes, and was invited to be the speaker at the dedication of a new building in Columbus. I searched for and found that speech in my files and read it. I shouldn't have.

I was 37 years old at the time and had no earthly business making that speech. The title was The Best is Yet to be from a Robert Browning poem, and in that speech I talked about aging, a subject about which I knew nothing. I was actually a little embarrassed by my presumptiousness and found myself hoping that the residents of that Presbyterian Home forgave me. I thought about something Carlisle Marney said once at a conference of young ministers. He was lecuturin on preaching and he said that if we ever thought it was a good idea to preach a sermon on the Apostles Creed, we should skip the part that says "We believe in the Resurrection of the Body". Nobody under the age of 75, Marney said, should try to preach on the resurrection of the body.

In any event I reached Marney's standard earler this year and I do understand what he

meant every morning when I try to bend down to tie my shoes. In fact, I understand what a character in a Wallace Stegner novel meant when remarked that whenever anyone asked him what it felt like to be an old man, his answer was that he did not feel like an old man at all. He felt like a young man with something the matter with him.

More and more I love something the late mayor of Chicago Harold Washington said. He had come from his annual physical exam and at a press conference a reporter asked him how it went. "just fine", the mayor responded. "Everything works, but everything hurts."

I have finally made it... I not only turned 75 earlier this year, something happened to me recently that eloquently confirmed my new estate. I often ride the CTA bus from my home

to the downtown offices of the Christian Century two days a week. The 151 bus is usually crowded and I have to stand. So, there I was, hanging onto the hand strap, lurching and bumping along with my briefcase over my shoulder, trying to read e mails on my i phone when the most amazing thing happened. A young woman, mabye in her early twenties stood up from her seat and said, "Excuse me, sir, you can have my seat." It was truly amazing. Even more amazing, I sat down in her seat. It was very nice. And so, I do have a few credentials for my assignment this morning.

One of my all-time favorite persons is the late Winston Churchill. He lived an astonishingly full life in the great days of ther British Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, right up to the 1950's and 60's. As a young man he served in the British military in South Africa,,as

First Lord of the Admiralty, won a seat in theHouse of Commons, and was the British Prime Minister during the rise of Nazi Germany, and led Great Britain to stand alone during the London Blitz, and threat of Nazi invasion. I love the fact that when Churchill was 82 he didn't have enought to do, had too much time on his hands and so wrote the four volume History of the English Speaking People..

Churchill said a lot of inspiring and important things, also some very funny things. He was, as you know, a master at the English Language, eloquent, his sntences always complete and his grammar always correct and precise. One time, however, he ended a sentence with a preposition, whiuch happens all the time now but used to be a faux pas. A reporter caught him.. "Sir Winston, you just ended that sentence with a preposition" to which Churchill

immediately responded.."that, sir .. ending a sentence with a preposition is something with which I will not put."

On the floor of Parliament, where the rhetoric can be pretty rough, he often argued and tangled with Lady Nancy Astor. After a particularly strong and acid exchange, Lady Astor said, "Mr Churchill, if you were my husband, I would give you poison". To which Churchill responded, "Lady Astor, if you were my wife, I would drink it."

He said, "If you are going through hell,keep going." As the bombs fell on the people of London every night and the entire nation was afaid, he said, "Never give in. Never. Never. Never."

But I think the most important thing that

Winston Churchill ever said was this: "You make a living by what you earn and get. You make a life by what you give."

Linda told me that the theme this year for all the campuses of The Presbyterian Homes in Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota, is "Love One Another". Like Churchill's "You make a living by what you get but make a life by what you give", I think "LOve One Another" is the most important and far reaching and radical thing Jesus ever said. It is also well known, to say the least. You and I have heard it all our lives. It is so familiar, so common, it always seems simplistic, trivial even. It is helpful to remember how and where and when he said it.

It was at the table of the Last Supper, the night before the Friday on which he will be crucified, put to death by the Roman authorities for,

among other things disturbing the peace. Matthew, Mark and Luke remember that after the meal that night, Jesus took a loaf of bread, broke it and said "this is my body broken for you. Eat this -in remembrance of me." He pored wine into a goblet and blessed it an said, "this is my blood shed for man. Drink, all you from this cup in remembrance of me". Word we remember and actions we reenact when we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.. But John, the fourth gospel, remembers that before dinner Jesus took off his garment, tied a towel around his waist, took a basin of water, and knelt in front of each of them and washed their feet. A servant always did that, a common courtesy extended to dinner gusts. It was unprecedented for the host to do it. And it was then that Jesus said, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another."

So, given the circumstance: that it was the last mean Jesus would share with his friends, and that he seems to have known that it was, in fact, their last mean together, given all that, these simple words, this last instruction,is surely a summation, a final mandate. "What I have been doing and saying for these past three years comes down to this."Love one another."

It was the heart of the matter. And so was what he said one time when a man asked him what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Now mostly we interpret eternal life as something that happens later, after we are done with this life. But the scholars who know all about language tell us that what the man was asking about was life now, full life, totally alive life. How can I be fully alive now?How can I life fully, every day,

every hour, every minute of every day, not later, but now, while I am alive? How, at the end of the day, can I be content, fulfilled, ? How can I be happy?

When you think about it, it is the basic human question, the question that is the heart of all philosophy and political and social theory. How can I be alive? How can I be happy? I don't think we ever stop asking that question no matter how old we are.

It is such an urgent, central question, that there si a whole industry, a very profitable industry to respond to it. It is called "The Happiness Industry".There is a whole library of books on the topic. Some of them are transparently trivial, but nevertheless millions of people buy them. "Happiness is knowing what you want and getting it. And getting what

you want and will make you happsy is a matter of willing it and wanting it deeply and with everything in you, with all you heart, mind and souls and strength. One popular televangelisr calls it "Name it and claim it". Some is blatantly exploitive: "Send in your maoney and you will feel better about yourself."

But some of it s high-brow, intellectually and academically rigorous, based on sociological and pschoogical research.

The Sunday New York Times lead review a few weeks ago featured Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky who teaches psychology at the University of California. Her two books *The How of Happiness* and *The Myth of Happiness* are so highly regarded that her academic colleagues call her “The Queen of Happiness.” Professor Lyubomirsky argues that you have a

“happiness set point” encoded in your genes. When nice things happen, you become happy. When not-so-nice things happen, you become unhappy—which didn’t seem particularly profound to me. Perhaps I missed something.

Popular American author Gore Vidal weighed into the debate once by saying “For true happiness, it is not enough to be successful oneself, one’s friends must fail.”

It’s complicated business, happiness is. It’s big business. It sells a lot of books and seminars and retreats. It’s what we all want. It is also stunningly simple. We want to be happy. We want to live in a way that makes us happy.

Do you remember how Jesus answered the man who asked what he had to do to gain eternal life?. He said to the man "What does your law say?"

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said, “That’s it. That’s right. Do this and you will live.”

Now, the man was a lawyer and lawyers ask a lot of questions. So that’s what he does, asks “Just who exactly is my neighbor?”

What comes next is one of the best short stories in the history of stories, certainly one of the most beloved. Scholars point out that the point of this story lies close to the heart of the world’s great religions. It is also the foundation of a system of ethics as well as a way to live your life.

Many of you know this story. Here’s the short form. A man is walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He’s mugged, his money is stolen, he is beaten and left lying beside the road. Two men walk by, see him, and keep on

walking. That part of the story always makes me cringe because they both were religious officials.

A third man approaches, a Samaritan, a member of a despised minority. He stops, patches up the man’s wounds, lifts him onto the back of this donkey, takes him to a guest house, arranges for his care, promises to return and pay the bill.

“Which of these,” Jesus asks, “was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” “That’s easy,” the lawyer responds. The one who showed him compassion, kindness, the one who allowed the man’s condition to touch his heart, the one who stopped what he was doing and knelt by the roadside and did something to help. The one who loved. “Do this,” Jesus said, “and you will live. Do this and you will be alive.” Do this and you will become

the person you were created to be. Do this and you will become truly you.

William Sloane Coffin, long-time Chaplain of Yale, civil rights and peace advocate, put it this way: “Descartes was wrong —‘Cogito ergo sum’ —‘I think therefore I am.’ Nonsense,” Coffin said. “It’s ‘Amo ergo sum’ —‘I love therefore I am.’”

So simple; so radical. So utterly contrary to what our consumer, market culture tells us a thousand times a day, day after day. Buy this, own this, consume this and you will be happy and fully alive. I like to read the Sunday New York Times. It’s an all day project, and I save for last a section of the paper called “Sunday Styles.” I think of it as a Modern American Happiness Manual. The contents are a snap shot of current cultural trends. There are full-page ads for Calvin Klein, Prada, Dior, Lauren — big, full-page shots of anorexic young men

and women who look profoundly bored and unhappy. Why do they look so unhappy? I know I’m guilty of way over-interpreting here. But, I conclude every week that models for the Happiness Manual do not look happy because what they are selling won’t make you happy. It’s a big lie, and I fantasize that these young people are looking bored and terminally unhappy because they know it.

There is an alternative. It is the heart not only of Christianity, it is at the heart of all greta religions. It is the most important, most far-reaching and radical thing Jesus ever said. ..Find something to love, something big and grand enough to give your love to; something beyond yourself that calls out of you your attention, your moral and emotional commitment, your generosity, your heart and your love.

Find some cause, some one, some thing beyond your own amusement and comfort, something that calls out of you - your heart, your passion, your love, no matter who you are, no matter how young or old you are. You will come alive, you will be alive, you will be fully alive, as you love. That was his promise. That is his promise.

Henry Betts is one of the most fascinating people I have ever met: a physician who early in his career noticed how difficult life is for people with physical disabilities. Not only was it difficult to treat them medically, but no one was even trying to address the disability itself, whatever it was. Life for the disabled was miserable, one barrier after another in the process of moving from one place to another, negotiating doorways and aisles and restaurants and bathrooms. It was confining

and humiliating and debilitating. So Henry Betts went to work, not only devising new, ground-breaking techniques for the process of rehabilitation, but threw himself into the social and political arena, advocating, arguing, lobbying for better, kinder, more compassionate public policy. Curb cuts, for instance, so simple, but so absolutely necessary if you are in a wheelchair. Dr. Betts founded the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, the leading rehabilitation facility in the nation and he inspired and helped write the “Americans with Disabilities Act” which literally moved mountains and made life better for millions of Americans.

It is my honor to know him. Over a pleasant lunch he told me a story I have never forgotten. It happened while Dr. Betts was the Director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. A teenaged boy, a quadriplegic, in a

room by himself became withdrawn, terribly depressed, stopped communicating with anyone, refused to interact with the staff, wouldn’t get out of bed for therapy, assumed a fetal position facing the wall and went into what Dr. Betts called “total withdrawal from life.” He apparently had decided that there was nothing to live for, no reason to go on living. The staff of the Institute was afraid he would die.

And then, because there was no available appropriate space, the staff put a severely burned three-year-old boy in the room with him. The teenager turned his back and ignored the little boy at first. Then, slowly, he began to notice him and watch him and listen to what the doctors and nurses and physical therapists were saying about him. And then a miracle happened. The depressed teenager began to care about his little roommate. Before long, he

was pressing the call button, telling nurses to bring pain medicine, nagging the staff: “maybe he needs a drink of water, more food, he’s not eating enough.” And then he started to report to the doctors and nurses what he observed and began to advise them as to the little boy’s treatment and therapy. He became animated: “why don’t you try this?….that?”

The teenager, literally, came back to life when he opened his heart and started to care about another human being.

And that is what I pray for you this morning...health of course, many more years, security and comfort ,but most of all that you will continue to care deeply, that you will love someone, something, some cause beyond your own comfort, that calls out of you, your heart, your imagination, your bright intelligence, your creativity,, which is to say your love, and you will be alive, every day of your life.